

St Edmunds 4th July 2021 – JULIE BARHAM

2 Corinthians 12:2-10, Mark 6:1-13

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Having ben back from Orkney for a fortnight, I am desperately trying not to be the kind of person who keeps saying “when I was on holiday”, especially as with one thing and another we were unsure whether we would actually be able to go, and I know a lot of holiday plans have had to be changed or cancelled. But it was lovely! For some one who was born and brought up in the midlands, and has returned five years ago, I love looking at the sea. Not that I can get onto the beach – Morgan doesn’t like sand - but there is something deeply soothing about the waves rolling in and out. Being on a relatively small island for a fortnight meant that the sea, or at least a loch, was usually visible. It was wonderful!

Another thing that I so enjoy is that it is a relatively small community on the main island, of about 2,200 residents. Because I felt so safe I ventured back into shops, including the Orcadian bookshop. I think they ought to have offered me a reader in residence job! I bought a lot of wool from a small shop over a number of visits, every time the shopkeeper had to get the big balls of wool down from a top shelf, and stifle the smallest sigh. The shop could only take cash – do you remember that – and it was Scottish notes so I had to check which was which. I think she will remember my visit.

So why am I going on about my holiday? Well in our Gospel reading today there are two references to life in villages and small towns. Jesus is exasperated by the way that because the local people know him, know his family, know all about him, they refuse to believe him. He says that well known phrase, “Prophets are not without honour, except in their own kin, and in their own house”. He was making the point that if people think they know someone, they sometimes they feel that they can’t believe that they are capable of anything wonderful, let alone miraculous. It’s not quite a case of familiarity breeding contempt, but we get used to people and the novelty wears off, and we possibly aren’t as impressed with what people achieve when we have seen them do it before. Whole areas of towns can also be condemned, as in the comment made about Jesus elsewhere, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” We have all said it about a town, and area, even we have come

from a challenging area ourselves. It's another way of playing someone down, condemning them before we know anything else about them.

The other reference to a place that is challenging is Jesus' comprehensive instructions to his disciples he is sending out "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them". It sounds a bit harsh, reminding me of the condemnation of Old Testament towns because they didn't listen to God's messages, though there might be one or two individuals who would listen, and they were saved. Is Jesus being realistic here, saying that you can't force people to listen to you, and just get out of there? Do we think that we can only push the message of Jesus so far?

What makes me smile about this passage is that statement that Jesus couldn't do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. So just a few people who experienced life changing healing. Only a few people given new hope. Barely worth mentioning.

We are experiencing a sort of miracle in this country at the moment as new vaccines have been developed that are changing our lives, meaning that the link has been largely broken between infection and hospitalization and worse. These are vaccines that have been developed quickly, efficiently and safely which are incredibly effective. I could get incredibly emotional about how they have meant new hope, and I hope and pray that they can be given, not only to nearly every adult in this country as soon as possible, but to parts of the world where they desperately need hope, where medical facilities really couldn't cope with a huge outbreak. Vaccination is a modern day miracle, which needs to be shared with as much of humanity as possible.

Our other reading today is from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. And it is the typical out pouring of a contradictory character. He claimed elsewhere to be a lawyer, and it does seem so here, as he ties himself in knots to tell his story of the man caught up into heaven. He seems to be talking about his own thorn in the flesh here, maybe a disability or illness. Either way, it has caused much debate over what he was finding so challenging, given that he accomplished so much in terms of travelling, speaking and generally testifying to Jesus' continuing power in lives, the offer of a new life in Christ.

Paul remember, is the man who condemned those who followed Jesus in those first weeks and months after the resurrection. He was a party to the death of

Stephen, he had been given a commission to arrest all those Christians he could find in Damascus. He wasn't just someone who stood in a crowd and shook his head, or got whipped up by others to shout abuse; he was a fervent anti-Christian. And yet he is, a fierce proponent of the faith, the last person anyone would have expected a short while before.

Here he is, confounding all expectations for someone of his background, someone from his area, setting down what he thought and believed about the basis of his life and what he sees as the greatest challenge to it. He says he will put up with all kinds of things for the sake of Christ, including weaknesses and calamities. For he says, "Whenever I am weak, then I am strong"

Being from a challenging place, or being so well known, is perhaps difficult. Having what people see as a disability is definitely difficult, especially when we live in a society where casual discrimination still takes place, and it has been found that in a pandemic the overwhelming majority of those who died were known to have a disability. But, Paul argues, it can make people stronger. Perhaps it makes us try harder, know that we ourselves are not invincible, not doing something in our own strength. It means we are leaving room for faith, because being self sufficient is hard.

I think that it is important to remember that we must leave room for faith in our lives. That we realise that we can't do everything ourselves, that we can be vulnerable, challenged yet still strong in our faith. Maybe we have accepted that we are not runners, we will never play Wimbledon-worthy tennis. Maybe we admit to weakness, that we have difficulties. We can all leave space for Jesus in our lives even if we know that in the eyes of the world we are different, challenged or just a bit ineffective, and in admitting that weakness we can be truly strong. Amen.